

Talkin' Trash

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There I was—right in the middle of all the action as the 101st Airborne Division rolled through Iraq in its quest to remove Saddam Hussein from power. As dramatic as that may sound, we also did a lot of uninteresting tasks during my time in Iraq, such as setting up assembly areas in the middle of the desert. There's actually a lot to do on these little islands of operational activity, including feeding hungry troops, refueling helicopters and everyone's favorite chore—trash disposal. In the middle of the desert, however, there isn't a sanitation department that comes by every Thursday to pick up the garbage and make it magically disappear like in the States.

So what exactly do you do with trash in the desert? Well, you can bury it, but the hole has to be big and deep enough to keep the desert critters from digging the trash right back up. This was our first tactic, but we were never able to dig a hole big enough to accommodate the amount of garbage produced by our company of 30 men. When digging the hole became a full-time job, we decided there had to be a better way.

Being the brilliant young warrant officer I was, I came up with a masterfully efficient plan—we'd burn the trash every couple of days instead of filling and covering the hole every day. Everyone commended me for my genius, and the burning ritual became the standard method for trash disposal and even provided a little entertainment for us. This method worked well until a couple of months later, when we finally moved out of our tents and into an actual building. Unfortunately, the building's indoor plumbing didn't work, so we had to continue using our two-stall outdoor shower until the repair contract came through.

It was getting close to winter, so we were all elated when the indoor shower was installed and running a few weeks later. We didn't need the outdoor shower anymore, so our next question was what to do with it. The shower was now technically trash, which, in my mind, qualified it for the torch.

I consulted the first sergeant and, after he nodded his approval, I excitedly gathered the materials I'd need to set the shower ablaze. The shower was constructed of several four-by-eight-foot sheets of plywood nailed to two pallets, and I didn't think it was necessary to tear it down. I thought a "small amount" of accelerant in the form of JP-8 should do the trick, so I doused the inside of the stalls, struck a match and stood back to admire my handiwork.

The fire started out small enough and was easily manageable until the wind picked up. The fire really began blazing then, and the wind caught inside the stalls sent flames shooting 35 to 40 feet into the air. The flames attracted all sorts of attention, including that of a battalion commander about a half-mile away. The flames were so hot you could feel the heat from 50 feet back—not a good thing, considering there was an LMTV parked just 25 feet away.

After the flames died down, I was relieved the only casualties were a plastic chair and my pride. Nevertheless, we learned an important lesson that day—always respect fire! Many of our posts are remote and have limited access to firefighting and crash/rescue equipment, which reinforces the importance of fire extinguishers.

There are three types of fire extinguishers purchased by the Army for situations like the one I found myself in. Class A extinguishers are used for ordinary combustibles such wood

and paper. Class B extinguishers are used on flammable liquids, greases and gases. Class C extinguishers are used for energized electrical equipment. Portable extinguishers also are rated for the size of fire they can handle. This rating is a number from 1 to 40 for Class A fires and 1 to 640 for Class B fires. The rating is listed on the label—for example, 1A or 2A and/or 5B, 10B or 20B. The higher the number, the larger the fire the extinguisher can handle.

Once the right extinguisher is selected, it must be placed in an obvious location such as an exit or corridor. Extinguishers should be inspected periodically for serviceability, and leaders must ensure Soldiers are trained to safely use the different types of fire extinguishers found in their workplace. Live training can be performed safely with the assistance of qualified firefighting personnel; however, if this isn't possible, the PASS technique should be discussed at a minimum. The PASS technique is simple:

Pull the pin

Aim the extinguisher nozzle at the flames

Squeeze the trigger while holding the extinguisher upright

Sweep the extinguisher from side to side at the base of the flames

Leaders also should point out that fire extinguishers aren't used as their name implies. They're designed only to suppress a fire long enough for everyone to safely exit the area. Although I was lucky that my fire died out on its own, you should never attempt to burn anything without first having the proper equipment on hand. You may burn more than your pride.